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## **‘Something blurred in her?’: Imagining Hospitality in Graham Swift’s *The Light of Day***

### **Abstract:**

This article explores the complex position of Kristina, a refugee, in Graham Swift’s 2003 novel *The Light of Day*. She has been overlooked in criticism of the novel which has tended to focus on the narrator George. I argue that Kristina, in her role as both proximal and distant to the text, allows us to ask pressing questions about the nature of hospitality in relation to the contingent and unstable position of asylum seekers and refugees within British national space. Drawing on Jacques Derrida’s work on hospitality, I argue that the novel’s self-conscious mode of narrative expression both situates and problematises the imagination as a potential space of accommodation for asylum narratives.

During the early 1990s, Western European countries were forced to confront their ethical duties towards those fleeing the break-up of Yugoslavia. As great numbers of people sought refuge in neighbouring states, the issue of how to deal with refugees became as pressing as it had been after the end of WWII and was considered a crisis.<sup>1</sup> Unlike in 1945 however, most new arrivals to Western Europe were only offered temporary protection, a measure which denied them the usual rights afforded refugees: travel documents, identity papers and the chance of family reunion. The 1990s thus represented a seismic change in attitudes towards, and the management of, international asylum and protection. Danièle Joly comments that the period initiated ‘a substantial paradigm shift for Europe from uncoordinated liberalism to harmonised restrictionism’.<sup>2</sup> Towards the end of the decade, the UK saw considerable economic growth such that the proliferation of migrant workers, coupled with growing rates of asylum applications, ushered in a new era of temporary and contingent immigration to Britain, which remains distinct from the country’s postcolonial diasporic communities.

Textual responses to the often clandestine presence of refugees and asylum seekers within the UK have been relatively few. Where authors and filmmakers such as Hanif Kureishi, Meera Syal and Gurinder Chadha read immigration as part of the ongoing construction of a narrative of multicultural Britain, others are troubled by the solitariness and instability of the asylum process – Caryl Phillips in his 2003 novel *A Distant Shore* and Abdulrazak Gurnah in *By The Sea* (2001) have both addressed these concerns. If postcolonial texts of the late eighties and the nineties are able to anticipate a progressive narrative of hybridity, then those engaging with refugee and asylum issues in more recent years reflect a disavowal of British hospitality to immigration. Playful transgressions such as those in Kureishi’s *The Buddha of*

*Suburbia* (1990) and Chadha's *Bhaji on the Beach* (1993) become unthinkable for the refugees portrayed in the novels by Phillips and Gurnah, who are bounded by a series of borders both social and material.

Of the recent novels that have contributed to the growing interest in asylum and hospitality – Chris Cleave's *The Other Hand* (2008), Monica Ali's *In the Kitchen* (2009) and Manzu Islam's *Burrow* (2004) – Phillips' *A Distant Shore* and Gurnah's *By the Sea* most explicitly address the troubling condition of forced migrancy as distinct from narratives of diaspora and post-war immigration. Both novels narrate the lives of refugees who arrive in Britain seeking asylum, and though their titles hint at the horizon of hope and expectation figured by the image of the sea shore, the possibility of safe refuge is consistently deferred. Despite securing a flat 'by the sea' on the Kent coast, Gurnah's protagonist Saleh remains aware of his contingent existence as a refugee throughout the novel, never forgetting the provisionality of his place in Britain. Phillips' central character, Solomon, clings to the side of a cross-Channel ferry and is washed up onto England's shores, only to end his life drowned in a canal after a brutal beating. Seeking to bring the lives of refugees into sharp focus, both narratives cleave closely to their central characters, an approach subverted by the novel which concerns me here: Graham Swift's *The Light of Day* (2003). Unlike Phillips and Gurnah, Swift articulates the ambivalent status of refugees and asylum seekers through an emphasis on the inaccessibility of his refugee character, details about whom are conveyed through a highly localised narrative voice. As I will demonstrate, *The Light of Day* represents a more tentative engagement with asylum narratives, expressing hesitancy about the social and textual possibility of hospitality towards refugees.

Kristina, the refugee figure in *The Light of Day*, shares neither an intricate historical relationship to Britain, nor a localness which might confer legitimate status as her presence in the UK is temporary. An oblique and impalpable presence in the novel, information about Kristina is provided through the conjectural imaginings of the narrator George, a private detective. Here, he pictures her somewhere in Europe after she has left London:

I see her sitting too, at some pavement café. Geneva? Zagreb?  
Dubrovnik? Winter sunshine. Steaming coffee cups, glinting table  
tops. Her eyes are hidden by sunglasses. You can't follow her gaze.  
You'd look and think: no child. A woman of the world.<sup>3</sup>

George can only 'see' her in his imagination, yet even here he is impeded by her hidden eyes and impenetrable gaze. The imaginative difficulties that George encounters in this passage reflect those experienced by authors attempting to engage with refugee and asylum seeker narratives. The solitariness and ambivalent political status of these groups make them distinct from traditional notions of diasporic accommodation, and raise pressing questions about British hospitality to immigration. George's thwarted attempts to act as host to Kristina's story hint at her inaccessibility, yet also suggest that the borders and boundaries of the imagination might not be subject to such rigid cultural circumscription as national and domestic space. Through the figure of Kristina, Swift considers how it might be possible to approach and welcome the arrival of an unexpected 'other'. The question this article examines is how far George, and the text itself, are able to be hospitable to her unfamiliar presence through recourse to the imagination.

Given temporary refugee status as a result of the war in Croatia, Kristina is described as a 'stateless person, only half within the law' (p. 78). She is also only half within the novel itself, as the first person narrative relies on George's memory and imagination in retelling the story. Hired to witness her departure from the UK at the end of the war, George constructs a conjectural narrative around Kristina and her time in London. After her student visa expires and she becomes an asylum seeker, Bob and Sarah Nash invite Kristina to live with them in their house on Beecham Close, in the well-off London suburb of Wimbledon Village. Soon after, Sarah discovers that she and Bob have begun an affair and, caught up in the moral complexity of the situation, agrees that Kristina move into a rented flat in Fulham until the war is over. Despite these initial concessions, on his arrival home after taking Kristina to the airport, Sarah stabs Bob to death with a kitchen knife.

George describes these events from the perspective of a day two years later, in 1997. In the intervening years, he has been visiting Sarah in prison and, with her tuition, has begun to use his analytical skills as a detective to investigate words and their meanings, to 'hold them up to the light' (p. 177). Yet George's narrative is replete with cliché and proverbial wisdom; a linguistic characteristic echoed in the novel's thematic concern with commonplace detail, such as geographical routes, and the method for preparing the perfect Coq au Vin. [In his article on the novel, David James describes these intricate yet prosaic descriptions as 'quotidian mnemonics', which articulate a relationship between location and recollection. The movement from 'outward observation' to 'inner obligation' identified by James is, in my view, the locus of Swift's challenge to British approaches to immigration, whereby the novel acts as a site of intersection between personal and public responses to the presence of forced migrants.<sup>4</sup> Paradoxically, though the novel is firmly embedded in its narrator's](#)

personal geography, it is from within this highly localised space that it enacts a critique of British hospitality to immigration. Moreover, the novel explores the idea of hospitality from within its narrative form, localising not only thematic content, but also the narrative language. It is, in fact, the narrator's idiomatic expression that articulates, and attempts to transgress, the borders preventing Kristina from emerging as a subject.

My reading of the novel positions George's dependence on clichéd phraseology as exposing the limits of his imaginative capabilities; the conceptual familiarity of such language is one of the key ways in which Kristina is excluded from the text. Yet this exclusion is problematised by George himself, who seems aware of his inadequacy as host to Kristina's story and his linguistic constraints: 'It's just an expression of course, words aren't things, things aren't words' (p. 300-01). Thus, the novel's intimations of narrative hospitality are formulated through a re-evaluation of linguistic familiarity. As we shall see, this tension between George's means of expression and his awareness of its limitations, foregrounds questions of imaginative hospitality in the representation of asylum narratives and is one of the key critical insights of the text.

James Wood and Anita Desai have drawn attention to highly localised narrative of *The Light of Day*, with varying degrees of criticism and praise.<sup>5</sup> My own reading of the text positions the thematic familiarity of the novel as the ground upon which we begin to conceive of the unfamiliar – embodied in the figure of Kristina. Moreover, I will suggest that, far from focusing exclusively on the private world of London's suburbs, *The Light of Day* obliquely yet purposefully references the other worlds that exist alongside it, and thereby configures these parallel spheres –

Croatia's war-torn streets in particular – as unsettling counterparts to the detailed geography of South West London described in the novel.

In their book-length studies of Swift's work, Stef Craps and Daniel Lea have differently elaborated the thematic concern with the boundary between the known and the unknowable in the novel in ways that have an important bearing on my own argument.<sup>6</sup> Where Craps suggests that George's quasi-religious insight allows a form of non-rational, non-empirical knowing to emerge, Lea argues that his intuitive capabilities are negligible. Lea proceeds to assert that George's eye for detail, born of his detecting abilities, is unable to help him apprehend other people and results in occlusions in the text, such as Sarah's motives for the murder, and how Bob and Kristina begin their affair. Yet I would suggest that it is precisely the unknowability of such elements that is thematised in the novel. These gaps in knowledge and understanding articulate the tension between the necessity and the difficulty of imagining - of 'peer[ing] out at another world' (p. 40).

Jacques Derrida's work on hospitality focuses on the way in which national and textual imaginaries are able to host or accommodate the unexpected other. Drawing on his ideas, I will begin by extending the critical analyses outlined above to suggest that it is by tracing the incursion of the unfamiliar into its detailed, domestic setting, and the emergence of the unknowable within its own conceptual and linguistic frames, that *The Light of Day* raises questions of its ability to act as host to Kristina's liminal, and potentially inconceivable presence. Though keen to put himself 'in her shoes' (p. 100), George is not an omniscient narrator; the gaps in his knowledge are the contested ground of a hospitable response to that which is 'other' or different within the context of the everyday. With reference to Derrida's later writings, I will consider how these gaps in George's knowledge can be thought through in terms of



hospitality, and configured as potential spaces of accommodation. I will conclude the section by suggesting that such narrative openings are potentially undercut by the representation of Kristina as a parasite, which complicates the hospitable gesture of the book, and emphasises Swift's ambivalence concerning the possibility of representing refugee narratives.

The novel's effort to 'host' Kristina's presence is crucially played out in its representations of domestic space. Thus, the second focus of my reading of *The Light of Day* explores how the novel problematises the border between familiarity and difference, not only through the character of Kristina, but also by imagining spaces outside the suburban domesticity of the novel's setting. I will proceed to consider how this opening out to difference is both paralleled and problematised in the self-conscious mode of the narrative's expression. George's awareness of his imaginative inadequacy as narrator is intensified through his self-reflexive use of cliché, which enables him to rupture commonplace language by exposing its insufficiency. In concluding, I will question whether such self-reflexivity might emerge as hospitable to narratives of asylum, or whether ultimately it maintains a cycle of inscription.

### **Hospitality and the Parasite**

Daniel Lea argues that by 'becoming' Sarah, Kristina attempts to assert a secure and solid 'milieu' to replace the previous life now lost to her through the death of her family in the war in Croatia. According to Lea, Swift is concerned to show that such stability is an illusion and that 'we are all refugees', asserting that the multiple references to 'refugee', 'asylum seeker' and 'displaced person' appear in the novel to 'emphasise the many forms of displacement and the self-loss that Swift invokes'.<sup>7</sup> But

this is a novel that explores not just a subjective consciousness but how that consciousness perceives difference. Such efforts of perception are inextricably tied to a broader political sphere through the novel's exploration of George's struggle to imagine Kristina. To suggest that Kristina, as a refugee or asylum seeker, exists merely to illustrate the exiled nature of all subjectivities is, in my view, to neglect the important role she plays in the text.

Since she is both proximal and distant to the sphere of the novel – both internal and external to the text itself – Kristina acts as a conduit between worlds, signalling both her relevance and her inaccessibility. Kristina is presented through George's imagination, which paradoxically ensures her unknowability by fixing her within the generality of cliché. The terms used to describe her throughout the novel force her into a predefined role; she could be a 'lost soul' or a 'marriage-buster' (p. 57), a 'refugee' or a 'woman about town' (p. 170). However, she is barred from entering the text through the twin barriers of suburban front doors and the metaphorical prohibitions of language. The issue of hospitality is raised in the novel's challenge to open the door to Kristina's story. Hospitality anchors the public world of war, exile and nations to the domestic, private boundaries of the home, or in Jacques Derrida's terms, the 'being-at-home of my home'.<sup>8</sup> Kristina's disturbance of this 'home' problematises the guest/host dynamic such that the novel can be seen to challenge a Derridean approach to hospitality, a challenge which recasts the text as pessimistic about its ability to be hospitable to that which is 'other'.

In his work on hospitality, Jacques Derrida describes the challenge as 'always about answering for a dwelling place, for one's identity, one's space, one's limits, for the *ethos* as abode, habitation, house, hearth, family, home'.<sup>9</sup> '[E]thos as abode', or the ethics of place, is an explicit concern in *The Light of Day*, explored not simply

through the borders of the Nash household but also through the limits of the text itself. In inviting Kristina into her home Sarah attempts to answer for her abode and reduces the limits of her own sovereignty by allowing Kristina to take her place as 'Bob's woman' (p. 90). Similarly, George's narrative explores these boundaries within the context of the mind and imagination. But the question remains as to how successful are their respective acts of hosting, and how far texts themselves can conceive of difference without diminishing its particularity.

Derrida makes a distinction between what he sees as conditional and unconditional hospitality. The former constitutes the laws that surround the concept of hospitality such that any home – or nation – may remain sovereign. The latter, by contrast, considers the possibility of welcoming an 'absolute, unknowable other', without asking them to account for themselves, nor that they enter into a pact with the host. Since one would be inconceivable without the other, Derrida invokes a delicate interdependency of the two. Yet *The Light of Day* seems to question the practicability of this balance, hinting that the one place it might exist, the fragile space of the imagination, is ultimately unable to host otherness since it will always seek to inscribe this difference into a familiar context. Try as he might, George reduces Kristina to a conceptually familiar frame of reference as this appears to be the only way he can conceive of her. Thus, for Swift, it may not be the laws of hospitality that preclude being host to the unknowable, but the failure of the imagination.

A useful comparison may be drawn between Derrida's ideas on hospitality and those of Emile Benveniste, who argues that in the ancient world the nature of hospitality was predicated on reciprocity.<sup>10</sup> This is something commonly perceived as impossible for refugees, hence their representation as parasitical.<sup>11</sup> For Derrida, unconditional hospitality means providing it without the expectation of compensation.

Thus, it breaks the economy of gift giving as reciprocity would make the unconditional conditional, and moves beyond Benveniste's understanding of the economy of exchange in ancient societies. In an interesting addition, Derrida draws on the implication in Benveniste's work that hospitality is etymologically parasitised by its other, namely hostility. That the two are so closely linked suggests the always already present nature of otherness. As a result, hospitality remains 'forever on the threshold of itself' and is inevitably limited since the guest must respect the 'being-itself of what I am'.<sup>12</sup> In Derrida's formulation, hospitality can only ever be partial as unconditional and conditional are in perpetual tension. But, in *The Light of Day*, the narrative's limitation stems not from the intrusion of the conditionality of laws and legislations, but from George's inability to welcome that which is unknowable through recourse to the imagination. Thus, if hospitality is always limited and partial – conditional and unconditional constantly informing each other – so too is George's ability to imagine and accommodate otherness.

The hospitality/hostility relationship that Derrida evokes intersects with refugee discourses in the figure of the parasite, a familiar paradigm for conceptualising the relationship between guest and host. Meaning both closed and proximal, Beecham *Close* (the name of the street on which Sarah and Bob live) acts as an index of Kristina's troubled relationship with her host – both marginal and integral – which at times is configured as parasitical. She 'blooms' in the fertile soil of Wimbledon and undergoes a 'transformation' (p. 169) from a 'poor girl' to 'Bob's woman' (p. 90). Kristina has a relationship with Sarah's husband; lives in a flat paid for by them and gains valuable qualifications as a translator, also at their expense. However, the novel undercuts this parasitical representation by exposing the already-present potential for corruption and deceit in the closed-off world of suburbia through

Sarah's murder of Bob. Moreover, the novel analyses how a wilful ignorance of external events is itself a form of corruption which re-inscribes Kristina as an omen of misfortune. J. Hillis Miller argues that 'the parasite is always already present within the host, the enemy always within the house'.<sup>13</sup> The enemy 'within' may not be Sarah's capacity for murder, but the host's innate desire to banish otherness.

Hillis Miller's essay 'The Critic as Host' considers the notion of the parasite. He describes the genesis and meaning of the prefix 'para', suggesting that it signals at once both proximity and distance. This blurred distinction is present throughout the novel in George's attempts to coerce Kristina into a recognisable framework and simultaneously to point up her foreignness and difference: 'Italian [...] who would have said Croatian?' (p. 56). 'Para' means alongside, resembling, but also existing on both sides of a boundary line. It is something both equivalent and subsidiary. However, crucial for my understanding of Kristina's position within the text, 'para' is also the boundary or threshold itself. According to Miller, the parasite is the 'ambiguous transition' and 'permeable membrane'<sup>14</sup> of the border space, an idea echoed in Kristina's partial presence, which intimates the porous boundary between familiarity and difference.

If Kristina signifies a border or threshold, she is also bordered by her parenthetical relationship to the text. Throughout the novel, parentheses represent that which exists on the threshold of the narrative. The bracketed information is ancillary; only partially related to the story George tells: '(So how did that fit in with the plan?)' (p. 217), '(Did someone sitting next to her have to take pity?)' (p. 142). Narrative information thus makes its way into the text through parentheses but cannot escape their constricting borders, remaining as unanswered questions. George also uses parentheses as reminders of the partiality of his story: '(Let's assume.)' (p. 217), '(so I

picture it)' (p. 145). Being a sub-clause, both part and not part of the sentence, brackets may be thought of in terms of Miller's formulation of 'para' as existing along-side, thus creating a link to Kristina: 'So – he was knocking off this foreign girl (where was she from again?)' (p. 215). Kristina's bracketed and supplementary relationship to *The Light of Day* intimates the key challenge set by the novel: how it might be possible to perceive and engage with that otherness which is an oblique presence within the familiarity of the everyday. In considering the ways in which the novel might meet such a challenge, I will now turn to a more intricate reading of the novel's thematic and narratological strategies.

### **Familiarising the Unfamiliar**

Among Swift's challenges to his readers is his reluctance to provide moments that could be considered climactic. Instead, significance is often embedded within innocuous detail. Yet this unremitting ordinariness is precisely what is at stake in *The Light of Day* as the novel considers how otherness and difference appear within the familiarity of the commonplace. One of the most potent images of the furtive intrusion of otherness into the everyday is that of the Chislehurst Caves. The hidden network of caves snakes for miles beneath the suburban districts in which much of the novel takes place. The image is rendered yet more compelling by the fact of its appearing only once in the very last pages of the novel:

No one knew how they got there. An unsolved mystery, disappearing into the dark. I remember being taken there by Mum and Dad, after we moved from Lewisham. [...] The echoes, the maze of tunnels, the

stories of ghosts. The feeling that you might never get back into the light. The caves ran everywhere. They must have run under our house. Under the golf course. They were supposed to be pre-historic – the earliest people had taken refuge in them. (p. 315)

In a novel concerned with the ability to perceive, visibility and images of light and dark take on a particular resonance. Here, the dark ‘mystery’ of the caves is contrasted with the ‘light’ above ground. Though used by the ‘ancients’, and as a bomb shelter during the Second World War, the underground caverns remain invisible to those going about their daily lives above ground. The implication is that such ‘unsolved’ mysteries form part of the fabric of everyday life, but are seldom investigated. George explicitly refers to this discrepancy, and to a key concern of the text, when he states that the image of all those people ‘huddled’ together against the bombs is ‘hard to imagine’ (p. 315). As I hope to show, the tension in the novel over how George perceives other times and places is centred around his reliance on the imagination as a form of knowledge.

The caves underpin life above ground by providing a space of refuge, yet they simultaneously reject the myth of security upon which the suburbs rest since the ground beneath them is literally hollow.<sup>15</sup> As provider of refuge for Kristina, the Nash household – the ‘land of comfort and plenty’ (p. 78) – is also found to be unstable, as it breaks down soon after her arrival. Kristina, in her precarious relationship to Sarah and Bob’s home on Beecham Close, moves between the light streets of the suburbs and the metaphorical darkness of the caves, which, in their role as bomb shelter, also evoke the taint of the war with which she is associated. The caves thus bind across

time and space broader themes of hospitality, existing as traces of partially knowable times and places.

Swift uses this cross-referential technique throughout the novel. While in prison, Sarah is translating a history of the “[r]ich refugees” (p. 101): Empress Eugénie and Emperor Napoleon III. They settled in Chislehurst after fleeing France at the end of the Franco-Prussian war and lived on an estate that has now become a golf course. This historical element links Sarah and George – they both lived in the area as children – and, like the Chislehurst caves, illustrates how history is able to touch the present. These historical echoes assume greater significance in relation to the more contemporary war from which Kristina is taking refuge. Echoes of the war are found in descriptions of the nearby Callaghan Estate, where George once investigated a murder. The corner shop in the housing estate is described as a ‘trading post and fort, in enemy territory’ (p. 156), a marked contrast to the well-off Wimbledon Village. Such militarised language links the estate with Croatia such that both are considered in contrast to Wimbledon Village. Since it may as well be a ‘million miles’ (p. 277) from Beecham Close, the estate marks a point of contrast to the suburbs yet also intimates their vulnerability as, in fact, both are places ‘where murders happen’ (p. 215).

Like the Callaghan Estate, Beecham Close is militarised through George’s use of language in narrating Kristina’s presence there. It is described as a ‘quiet zone’ (p. 25) and Kristina becomes a ‘veteran of the suburbs’ (p. 144), both verbal echoes of the war she might have lived through. If Kristina brings war to the suburbs, George brings crime. He is also out of place in the ‘leafy’ streets of the ‘Village on the hill’ since he lives in ‘Wimbledon’s lower end’ (p. 25). George brings ‘that *stuff*’ that belongs ‘out there’ (p. 277) into Wimbledon. Both Kristina and George provide a



challenge to the 'safe as houses' suburbs in which Sarah and Bob live, as they are a reminder of that which Beecham Close would prefer to ignore. The Close thus remains closed against foreign intrusions: 'Private, keep out: not for you' (p. 34). Yet, the intrusion of military language and historical echoes in the text articulate the novel's critique of such insularity, and ruptures the unquestioned nature of the familiar.

The recurring image of the door invokes both the possibility of access to those other worlds hinted at in the novel and the challenge of imaginative perception: 'In dreams there aren't any locked doors' (p. 205). George considers the 'moment when a door opens' (p. 30), describing the process of enlightenment through experience and the possibility of glimpsing something outside the confines of his personal everyday. In the novel, doors have a dual metaphorical function: they are both an opportunity to perceive something external to the self, but also the barrier to the fruits of that perception. The closed doors of suburbia evoke both an imaginative and material barrier: 'Dusk. Why is it so strangely thrilling – winter dusk? A curtain falling, a divide. As if we should be home now, safe behind doors' (p. 252). The strange thrill of dusk seems to lie in the porous threshold between day and night, an incertitude that can be eliminated through the closure of doors. Yet, in the novel, they fail to reinforce this border, as the idea that we are 'safe behind doors' is belied by the gruesome event that occurs inside number fourteen Beecham Close: 'you can't lock your door against what's already inside' (p. 270). While Kristina is ostensibly the corruptive presence, it is Sarah who commits the act of murder.

Chapter nine explores the porosity of the threshold of knowability, symbolised above through the image of a door. The chapter details George's reflections on the few moments he and Sarah share before her imprisonment. By coincidence they bump

into one another in a supermarket the evening after Sarah hires George to spy on Kristina and Bob. The moment when they meet in the public space of the supermarket signals a transgression of their roles – '[w]e're all supposed to stay in our boxes' (p. 30) – yet for George the moment is like 'when a door opens' (p. 30); a coincidence that signals the movement to a new understanding of the self and the familiarisation of something that previously was unknown. Sarah and George decide to have a drink at a Brazilian café in Wimbledon, a place that introduces the juxtaposition of the familiar and the foreign. Yet the Brazil it describes is a typecast one. The clichéd exoticism of the café – its 'beach girls' and 'palm trees on the wall' – reflects the incongruity of Kristina's presence in the same suburb. George dwells on the other place that the café represents and wonders if people in Rio might be thinking of the 'cool green lawns' (p. 40) of Wimbledon, thereby evoking the tennis tournament, itself a cliché of exported Britishness. Despite George's efforts here, he seems unable to move beyond such superficial images.

In the café Sarah describes Kristina's history to George, her decision to come to the UK to study and her unintended transformation from student to asylum seeker. Kristina's original home was Dubrovnik, Croatia, which in George's 'out-of-date atlas' is still called Yugoslavia: 'The "former Yugoslavia"; a familiar phrase' (p. 44). The ubiquity of the phrase in the news paradoxically reduces its descriptive capacity such that it invokes an inadequate and partial image of Kristina's former home. The description is generalised, distant from the contemporary reality of Croatia. In questioning: 'What did all this have to do with a flat in Fulham?' (p. 44), George discovers the link: 'the Dalmatian Coast' (p. 44), a holiday destination much like the Rio evoked in their surroundings and somewhere a well-off British couple might have spent their summer before the war. In George's mind, Dubrovnik becomes, like

Brazil, a 'tourist destination' with its '[h]ot old walls, blue sea' (p. 44) yet remains unrecognisable as Kristina's home, which has been 'smashed apart' (p. 44). Though George familiarises Croatia, positioning it within a context relative to the Nash's milieu, his imaginative powers fail to extend to an understanding of it as specific to Kristina.

Thus we see George striving to negotiate between two fixed images of Kristina's country: the war-torn 'Former Yugoslavia' and the touristy 'Dalmatian Coast'. In playing out George's struggle to imagine in this way, the text interrogates the shifting boundaries of perception such that the reader is pressed to consider the possibilities and limitations of the imagination. In exploring the interpolation of different times and places in the novel, we have glimpsed George's struggle to loosen the linguistic restraints that keep his observations within the realm of cliché. Before returning to issues of expression, a more detailed exploration of George's narrativisation of Kristina herself might help demonstrate his use of the imagination as a form of insight. Many moments of conjecture seem second-hand; a familiarity derived from news footage of the war:

And did she go back to Croatia, really? Is she there now? [...] I see her still in Geneva. I see her (it's just a fancy) finding work with the UN. I see her, yes, going back to her old country – new country – but only as a member of some official team. A UN interpreter, an observer. Diplomatic credentials – but her own personal links. Post-war reconstruction and rehabilitation. (p. 284)

In this passage, a slippage between intuition and imagination is evoked by the triple repetition of the phrase 'I see her'. Moreover, George's 'fancy' seems inferred from manufactured media representations. The presence of official words such as 'reconstruction', 'rehabilitation' and '[d]iplomatic credentials' inject his speculations with the gloss of a news story and illustrate how political events filter into George's narrative voice. His inability to imagine a specific future for Kristina places her within a generic supranational framework and speaks of the superficiality of much of the information that seeps into the domestic sphere. Because George cannot locate her in a specific place, Kristina appears at an even greater distance from the intricacies of the narrative.

Chapter twenty-seven dwells at length on Kristina and explicitly addresses George's struggle to imagine her:

What did she want? It's easy to say she got what she wanted – as if it was all done by calculation: loss and gain. The bright-eyed girl who'd come to London to study, to get a life. Well, she'd got her compensation. A refugee? A flat of her own, for God's sake. [...]  
Compensation? More. All the time, after all, she might have been living through a war. (p. 144)

As in the previous quotation, there is an element of media influence here. The issue of housing appears alongside the notion of scheming and calculation, both fundamental concerns in refugee discourses. And, in asking 'What did she want?', George employs the rhetoric of giving and taking that dominates media representations of refugees and asylum seekers.<sup>16</sup> Rather than invoking a perceptible image of Kristina, George takes

the ‘easy’ option of reiterating media phraseology. Such a view requires little effort of the imagination as it is already visible and apparent in the news. More light is shed on this passage by comparison with an earlier one, in which the idea of what Kristina might have been living through is again referred to:

All those months, years – all the time – she must have thought it: I might have been there and not here. I might be dead too, worse than dead. I might have had to watch while they shot the others first, raped the others first, then shot them. She’d always know it. But here she was in a nice warm bed in Wimbledon. Lawns and trees. What are the rules now? (p. 78)

The slippage between first and third person narration here denotes George’s most successful attempt to put himself ‘in her shoes’ (p. 100). Though the images retain a certain media familiarity, this is the less ‘easy’ perspective on Kristina. Yet the question which ends the quotation reiterates the element of unknowability that pervades the novel, while the synecdochic ‘[l]awns and trees’ re-invoke the linguistic restraints under which George labours.

There are two distinct impressions of Kristina that equip George with the images he uses to visualise her throughout the novel. One is a photograph of her shown to George by Sarah, and the other is formed as he follows Kristina and Bob to Heathrow on her way back to Croatia. The photograph of Kristina provides the substance for much of George’s reflections:

The photo of Kristina was the poorer picture – even a little blurred. [...] A slim girl in jeans and sweater and an old outdoor jacket that didn't look like her own. Sarah's? Bob's? It was in the garden at number fourteen. She seems to have been involved in some physical task – sweeping up leaves maybe. She's holding the handle of some broom or rake. But she looks as though the camera's surprised her, trapped her into an expression she can't quite manage – [...] A poor photo, or something blurred in her? (p. 56)

Subsequent descriptions of Kristina, imagined by George, are usually in an outdoor setting wearing Bob's coat. Thus the limit-border of the photograph seems to literalise the limitations of George's imagination and deny Kristina a substantial presence in the text. Moreover, the idea of her being 'trapped into an expression she can't quite manage' refers not only to the ability of photographs to fix a certain reality, but also to George's tendency to trap Kristina within the formulaic language of his narrative. The 'physical task' she seems to be undertaking in the photograph intimates Kristina's ambiguous position in the Nash household as both guest and unpaid home-help, while her borrowed clothes further diminishes her presence in the novel. But it is the 'something blurred' that concerns me most here. The vague 'something' reiterates George's inarticulacy, while the idea that Kristina might be innately 'blurred' confers responsibility for her inaccessibility, not on the photograph, but on Kristina herself, establishing the unknowability that continues to thwart George's efforts to perceive her.

The only first-hand view George has of Kristina is when he follows her to the airport, an image that is explicitly contrasted to the photograph described above. In

the interim, she has ‘bloomed’, grown-up, no longer the subject of other people’s perceptions, or ‘trapped’ in an unwanted expression. George explains: ‘A transformation had taken place’ so that ‘you might have said’ they were ‘[d]ifferent people’ (p. 169). But instead of being freed from the fixing power of the photograph, Kristina has become impenetrable, a generic ‘woman about town’ wearing ‘an elegant suit’ (p. 169), an ‘unsolved mystery’ like the caves. George is only able to observe that there is ‘something foreign’ (p. 169) about her now.

Such failures of the imagination may be brought into sharper focus through a closer analysis of the expression of the narrative. George’s struggle with language and its ability to fix a superficial reality is mitigated by an awareness of his own limitations as a narrator. Thus his desire to conceive of Kristina, though ultimately flawed, signals an imaginative impulse crucial for the transgression of the bounded perceptions that keep people in their ‘boxes’. In fact, Kristina’s emergence as a subject depends upon George’s self-reflexive use of language as his interrogative narrative voice could potentially open a space in which Kristina is not bounded by reductive cliché.

In *The Light of Day* language both brings to light and obscures that which George attempts to imagine, despite his aptitude for insight and intuition. Rather than relying on words to describe reality, he questions the quality of the knowledge they provide by unravelling some of the assumed wisdom of aphorism and cliché: ‘[s]he’s reading my face like a book. But that’s just an expression. I didn’t read faces like books (I didn’t read many books), I read faces like faces.’ (p. 9). As well as exploiting the semantic possibilities of some words and phrases, George observes how inadequate they can be. During one of his visits to Sarah she asks: ‘[w]here would I be without you George?’, he replies: ‘In prison, I suppose’ (p. 24). George’s response

highlights the insufficiency of the cliché's expressive capacity, while simultaneously underscoring his imaginative failure: he is unable to conceive of possibilities other than the situation he and Sarah are in. This concern with language is thematised through Sarah's job as an English teacher and Kristina's own language learning and subsequent training as a translator, a job Sarah also undertakes. George says of translators that they are 'shadow people, halfway people' (p. 185) since they tread the line between difference and familiarity and facilitate the transition from unknowable to knowable; a transition George himself seems unable to make.

George's awareness of his role as narrator of Kristina's story extends to highlighting the fictionality of some of his observations. He insists on the unreliability of his own descriptions and is at pains to remind us that much of the narrative is supposition. The text is replete with asides such as: 'so I picture it' (p. 145) and 'it's just a fancy' (p. 284), narrative reminders of George's endeavour to host Kristina's story. The question is whether, in highlighting the fallibility of his own narrative, George succeeds in creating a space for Kristina to emerge as a coherent subject. The use of incomplete sentences in the novel is a site of tension that figures this possibility: 'Better a washed up detective, tracking down stray husbands, than no detective at all ...' (p. 67). Such open-endedness can be thought of as opening the narrative to a range of possibilities since the reader is bound to challenge the inevitability of received wisdom. When considering the issue of blame, George says of Sarah: 'if she'd never let that girl under her roof... If she'd never tried to be more than her teacher...' (p. 42). While it seems as if the reader is encouraged to imagine a different outcome, a less optimistic interpretation positions these elliptical moments as further testament to George's imaginative failure. Ellipses, while alluding to the possibility of otherness in the form of a different outcome, may only illustrate the



futility of such conjecture. The narrative's capacity to provide a hospitable space for Kristina remains limited and partial.

Kristina's simultaneous presence and non-presence within the text, figured in the elliptical moments explored above, signals the troubling terms of accommodating heterogeneous migrant narratives. Swift's response to this is found in the self-reflexive narrative architecture of *The Light of Day*, which enacts the tension between the imperative to imagine 'another country, another world' (p. 195) and the difficulty in doing so, thereby questioning how far literary discourses are able to attend to the situated experiences of refugees and asylum seekers. The sense of hope, which characterises the end of *The Light of Day*, is bound closely to the private and personal realm of George's love for Sarah, thereby attesting to his abandonment of Kristina's story. Moreover, George seems unwilling to overcome his imaginative constraints, the insularity he expresses is often wilful: 'The best place to be: where you won't know. How her brother died, how her parents died.' (p. 283). This missing information is not rendered up to the reader of the novel because George himself struggles to perceive it. The gaps left by his inability to imagine signal the novel's attempt to answer for its own limitations and speak of the continuing necessity of developing hospitable spaces for narratives of asylum. In opening this horizon of expectation, the novel takes a decisive step towards re-invigorating a dialogue around the representation of asylum seekers and refugees.

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<sup>1</sup> See Robin Cohen, *Frontiers of Identity: The British and the Others* (Essex: Longman, 1994), esp. Part Three.

<sup>2</sup> Danièle Joly, 'A New Asylum Regime in Europe', in *Refugee Rights and Realities: Evolving International Concepts and Regimes*, ed. by Frances Nicholson and Patrick Twomey (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 355.

<sup>3</sup> Graham Swift, *The Light of Day* (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 144. Hereafter references are given in brackets after the text.

<sup>4</sup> David James, 'Quotidian Mnemonics: Graham Swift and the Rhetoric of Remembrance', in *Critique*, 50:2 (2009), 131-155, p. 137.

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- <sup>5</sup> See James Wood, 'How's the Empress?', *London Review of Books* 25:8 (2003) and Anita Desai, 'Revenge Tragedy', *New York Review of Books*, June 2003.
- <sup>6</sup> Stef Craps, *Trauma and Ethics in the Novels of Graham Swift* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2005) and Daniel Lea, *Graham Swift* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005).
- <sup>7</sup> Lea, *Graham Swift*, p. 200.
- <sup>8</sup> Jacques Derrida, 'Hospitality', trans. by Barry Stocker and Forbes Morlock, in *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities*, 5:3 (2000), 3-18, p. 13.
- <sup>9</sup> Anne Dufourmantelle and Jacques Derrida, *Of Hospitality: Anne Dufourmantelle Invites Jacques Derrida to Respond*, trans. by Rachel Bowlby (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), p. 149-50.
- <sup>10</sup> Emile Benveniste, *Indo-European Language and Society* (London: Faber and Faber, 1973)
- <sup>11</sup> For a study of the relationship between refugees and the state see Khalid Koser, 'Refugees, Transnationalism and the State', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 33:2 (2007), 233-254.
- <sup>12</sup> Derrida, 'Hospitality', p. 13.
- <sup>13</sup> J. Hillis Miller, 'The Critic as Host', *Critical Inquiry* 3:3 (1977), 439-447, p. 446.
- <sup>14</sup> Hillis Miller, 'The Critic as Host', p. 444.
- <sup>15</sup> For an analysis of suburban space, see David Sibley, *Geographies of Exclusion: Society and Difference in the West* (London: Routledge, 1995), esp. Part One.
- <sup>16</sup> For a detailed study of media representations of asylum seekers and refugees see Article 19, *What's the Story?* (2003), < <http://www.article19.org/pdfs/publications/refugees-what-s-the-story-.pdf> > [accessed 30 August 2007].